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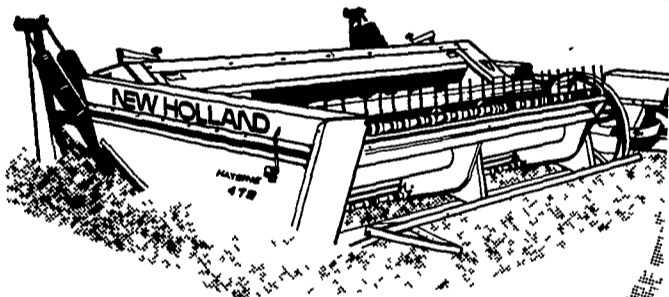
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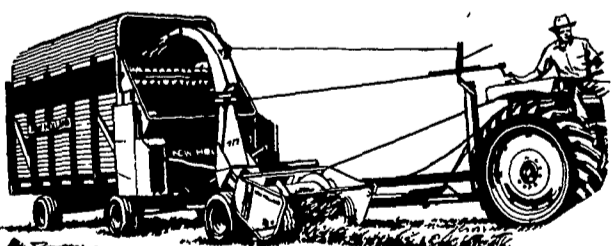
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Energy Crisis: What It Could Mean to Rural Areas

Nonmetro counties weathered the 1969-70 economic downturn far better than the metro areas. They also rebounded more swiftly and more vigorously during the good years of 1971-73.

As for 1974, one ERS economist expects that nonmetro areas will again have sizable employment increases but that the number of new jobs will hinge mainly on the impact of three forces:

✓ General softening of the economy now underway.

✓ Increasing pinch on industrial capacity and resulting shortages in many materials and supplies.

✓ And, last but not least, the energy crisis.

Jobs vulnerable. Recent rural job gains are especially vulnerable because of high dependence on gas and other fuels for production, transportation, and for the movement of people to jobs, shops, and so on. And, many communities could be hard hit because they depend largely for jobs on plastic and other local industries that rely heavily on oil and gas for feedstocks.

If fuel shortages persist or worsen, and prices climb, these industries in particular are likely to feel the squeeze: petrochemicals, leisure-time products, recreation and resort enterprises and nonfood retailing.

In addition, some economists think that tight money will keep 1974 housing starts at a relatively low level, whether or not the industry faces fuel and related shortages.

Brighter side. There are bright spots, however. The following industries will probably benefit in 1974 and succeeding years from the energy crunch: paper and paper products; coal mining; drilling for oil and gas; and industrial construction.

Projected allocations of fuel are expected to assure production, processing, and marketing of increased food supplies in 1974.

The impact of the forces mentioned earlier is already being felt in upward and downward shifts in output and employment.

✓ Mining employment in December 1973 was about 39,000 greater than a year earlier.

✓ Construction was started on scores of major generating, gasification, manufacturing, and other new plants in 1972 and 1973.

✓ The annual rate of housing starts in December 1973 was almost 739,000 units lower than August 1973.

✓ Production of synthetic fibers may have dropped as much as 20 percent in the last quarter of 1973.

✓ As many as a third or more of employees in plants producing recreation vehicles have been laid off since the spring of 1973.

In brief, here is the situation facing key rural industries, beginning with those for which the outlook is less promising:

Petrochemicals. Special priorities may be needed to prevent serious shortages in drugs and medical and surgical supplies. Increased feedstocks would appear to be required to reverse sharp cutbacks in production of polyester, dacron, and other synthetic fibers.

Also required to restore output would be expanded supplies of propane, both for fuel and as a curing and finishing agent.

Leisure-time products. Sales of recreation vehicles, pleasure boats, and other leisure-time products could be expected to plummet if fuel shortages persist.

Recreation and resort industry. Barring a sharp upturn in gas supplies in the next few months, the brunt of the shortages—borne up to now by winter sport centers—would be expected to shift to summer vacation spots, as well as to the motels, restaurants, and other facilities serving vacationers en route.

Nonfood retailing. Sales forces would be expected to shrink a bit,

especially if the economy loses momentum, rising prices take an increasing portion of the consumer's dollar, and families are forced to shop less often because of gas shortages.

Moving to industries with better prospects:

Paper and paper products. Demand for paper and paper products has been exceedingly strong in recent years, and the energy crisis could add to 1974 demand by triggering a switch to paper from plastic film and packaging materials. This industry also is unique in that about a third of its fuel requirements are met by burning bark, sawdust, and other processing wastes.

Coal mining. Because of its abundance, coal could well be the brightest spot in the energy picture for many years to come.

In 1974, however, it will not be easy to boost output to meet existing demand. Problem areas include—continuing labor unrest, difficulties in meeting health and safety regulations, shortages of hopper cars, and controversy over measures to reduce the impact of strip mining.

Drilling for oil and gas. Exploration for oil and natural gas has been greatly accelerated. Currently, however, there are troublesome shortages of rigs, pipe, and other drilling equipment and supplies.

Industrial construction. Many major plant construction and expansion projects are underway, and present signs are that starts in 1974 will continue at about the 1973 level.

Less homebuilding will also ease pressure on lumber and cement supplies. Production of boilers, generators, and other machinery and equipment should be adequate, especially if car makers reduce their demand for steel. But low-profit items, like reinforcing bars and structural steel, may be harder to get.

[Based on special material by Claude C. Haren, Economic Development Division.]

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